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ABSTRACT

African American urban sixth graders (28 males and 22 females), the majority of whom tested at or above grade level on the Iowa Basic Skills Test, were interviewed about 2 methods of selecting students for a summer science program. One method focused on student grades, and the other method focused on student interest in science. Subjects initially did not distinguish one method as significantly fairer than the other. By the end of the interview, however, approximately one-third of the subjects chose the selection method based on grades/test scores as fairer, while approximately one-third chose the method based on student interest as fairer, and the remaining subjects took various other positions. Male subjects shifted from an initial preference for student selection by grades to a more uncertain position. Female subjects continued to rate student selection by grades as a fairer selection process. Subject responses to the fairness of selection methods produced four themes relating to their views on the purpose of school. Implications of African American students' perceptions of fairness of student selection methods and subsequent views of the purpose of school are discussed. Two tables present study data. (Author/SLD)

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African-American students' perceptions of educational program selection processes based on grades or student interest

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Abstract

African-American students (6th grade), the majority of whom tested at or above grade level on the Iowa Basic Skills Test, were interviewed about two methods of selecting students for a "Summer Science Program", one method focused on student grades and test scores and the other focused on student interest in science. Subjects initially did not distinguish one method as significantly fairer than the other. By the end of the interview, however, approximately one third of the subjects chose the selection method based on grades/test scores as fairer, approximately one third chose the selection process based on student interest as fairer, and the remaining subjects took various other positions. Male subjects shifted from an initial preference for student selection by grades to a more uncertain position. Female subjects continued to rate student selection by grades as the fairer selection process. Subject responses to fairness of selection methods produced four themes relating to their views on the purpose of school. Implications of African-American students' perceptions of fairness of student selection methods and subsequent views of the purpose of school are discussed.

African-American students' perceptions of educational program selection processes based on grades or student interest

Kenneth A. Gleaves

A common practice for encouraging the educational advancement of African-American students has been to select those with high grades and test scores for special programs. The question addressed here asks what African-American students' perception of the fairness of this practice is. This inquiry is in the spirit of Woodson's (1933/1990) suggestion that: "To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is". In order to facilitate this process it seems logical that a dialogue must begin between educators, educational researchers, and African-American students which addresses these issues from the point of view of the student. This straightforward approach of asking students of any ethnic background about the validity of the academic practices they encounter is uncommon. There is evidence that students have constructive views on such matters that warrant fuller consideration (Fordham, 1991; Sosniak & Perlman, 1990; Thorkildsen & Schmahl, 1991).

I propose that, rather than look at those students who are having what may be seen as "typical" problems with the educational system, a more valuable place to begin an inquiry into urban African-American students' perceptions of

school is with a group of students who are achieving at or above grade level. The rationale here is that such students can be seen as "insiders" who are succeeding in a grade/test score-driven system and thus may be less likely than others to see this process as unfair. Along similar lines, Fordham (1991) has interviewed African-American high school students in "advanced placement" programs, although with an agenda which looks at these students from the perspective of their awareness of and capitulation to a dominant white culture educational system. This paper focuses more directly upon the issue of African-American students' views of student selection on the basis of grades/test scores specifically, with the intent to center students' attention on the aspect of selection practice itself and an evaluation of its fairness in and of itself. The larger question underlying this research was what African-American students think school ought to be achieving.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 28 male and 22 female urban African-American 6th grade students whose mean age was 11.7 years. These students were attending a four week Summer Program held at an inner-city college campus involving a variety of academic classes as well as social interaction with positive peer role models, exposure to a college lifestyle, and opportunities to engage in various cultural activities.

The students were chosen by their teachers (at public schools in different parts of the city) to attend the program largely on the basis their Iowa Basic scores, which were at or above grade level. A small number of students were chosen by their teachers on the basis of whether or not the teachers believed the student might benefit from the program.

Interviews

Subjects were asked to decide which of two selection processes would be fairer for choosing students for a hypothetical "Summer Science Program". The two selection processes were:

1. The selection of students for the "Summer Science Program" on the basis of a student's overall grades and "national test scores" (high grades/test scores or low grades/test scores).

2. The selection of students for the "Summer Science Program" on the basis of a student's interest in science (high interest or low interest).

To illustrate the first selection process, subjects were shown two "report cards" of two hypothetical students. One was the "report card" of a student who had four A's and a "national test score" of 95 out of 100. The other represented a student who had three C's and a D and a "national test score" of 20 out of 100. Subjects were told that under the conditions of this selection process, only

the student with high grades and test scores would be accepted for the "Summer Science Program".

To illustrate the second selection process, subjects were shown two "report cards" of two different hypothetical students. One stated that this student was "interested in science" and "has done many science projects". The other represented a student who was "not interested in science" and "has done no science projects". Subjects were told that the first student had a "high interest" in science and had done many science projects on their own initiative, whereas the other student had a "low interest" in science and so had not done any projects. Instructions indicated that under the conditions of this selection process, only the first student would be accepted for the "Summer Science Program".

Before proceeding, subjects were asked to explain the difference between the two selection practices and indicate which "student" would be accepted in each case. All recapitulated the main differences and indicated the proper "student" for each selection process.

Subjects were then asked (Question 1): "Is this way [grades] of selecting students for the Summer Science Program fair?"; (Question 2): "Is this way [interest] of selecting students for the Summer Science Program fair?". Subjects indicated the extent they agreed or disagreed with the selection process on a 5 point Likert-type scale: "YES yes ? no NO".

Subjects were then asked (Question 3): "Is one way of selecting students for the Summer Science Program fairer?". If subjects indicated one was fairer, they were asked which, and then whether that procedure was "a little bit fairer or a lot fairer than the other way?". This produced a 5 point scale running from 1 (Grades a lot fairer) through 3 (equally fair) to 5 (Interest a lot fairer). Subjects were then asked to explain their response.

Questions 4 through 15 asked students to evaluate the two selection processes from the perspectives of students with varying levels of test scores, varying levels of interest, and varying combinations of both. These were included as a way to stimulate subjects to think more fully about the initial question of which (if either) selection process was fairer.

Question 3 was repeated as Question 16 at the end of the interview to determine the subject's final position on the question ("Is one way of selecting students for the Summer Science Program fairer?") and then asked to explain their response.

Results

Subjects' perceptions of which selection method is fairer.

A 2 (Questions 1 and 2) X 2 (Gender) ANOVA revealed no significant main effects or interaction. The same analysis conducted on Questions 3 and 16 revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1,49) = 5.47$, $p < .05$. The interaction

of Gender and Question (3 versus 16) was also significant, $F(1, 48) = 6.18$, $p < .05$.

Insert Table 1 about here

As shown in Table 1, the main effect for gender indicated a greater tendency for females to see selection on the basis of grades as fairer. However, the significant interaction reflects the fact that this trend was apparent only at the end of the interview (Question 16).

Transcripts of answers to Question 16 were content analyzed to identify subjects' justifications for their choices. Category descriptions described below were reviewed by two scorers independently to classify subjects' justifications for their choice of which selection process was fairer. There were five disagreements out of the 50 cases. Disagreements were resolved by discussion between scorers. Descriptions of justification categories follow with brief extracts from the interview to illustrate them.

Selection by grades is the fairer practice because grades demonstrate knowledge or competence:

1. "Because they (grades) show what you know and it's got the grade on there to show what you can do in science."

2. "Because the person with high grades, they are more qualified to do it (participate in a science program) than a person that likes or wants to do it."

3. "Because they (students with high grades) be more,

like, experienced than other kids. These (students) be more experienced because they got high grades than others..."

4. "'Cause the students...they have high grades and they go in there and they be knowin' what they doin'. They know what they doin' more than if they have D's."

Selection by interest is the fairer practice because student interest promotes learning:

1. "I agree with the ones who are interested. Because the people who ain't interested they just be goin' there just to go there, but the people who are interested in it they'll be goin' there to get something out of it."

2. "Because students got to like it. Just because they got the high grades...they don't really have to want to do science. They really don't have to like it. They just doin' it to get they grades."

3. "Because the student likes to learn more about science than just getting high grades and forget about it. People with interest wants to move on like higher level, like wants to become a scientist or experience more stuff and making new interest so people can see."

Neither selection practice is fair because students should not be excluded from learning:

"Because you shouldn't just pick people out...should just teach them all the same thing at the same level. (The selection procedures are equal) because they're all kids that might and might not like science but they probably still want to learn more things."

Both selection processes are fair because grades indicate student interest:

1. "Because if you interested in science and you like science you gonna do good in it."

2. "Because if a person get D's or C's that doesn't seem like they really interested in doing that (subject), and they don't want to work hard at it."

3. "Because the grades and the way a person doesn't like science, that's about the same thing. 'Cause if a person get D's in science or C's that means they doesn't like it probably. If a person get A's they must like it."

4. "Because like, with students who like science and (high) grades...those two basically go together..."

Other:

This category consisted of subject responses that were of either an unrelated issue or no response.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

Results of this study raise some questions regarding the established academic practice of student selection for various educational programs on the basis of grades and test scores alone from the point of view of African-American students. The diversity of opinions presented here indicates a variety of ways in which these students see the fairness of sorting and ranking students by consideration of grades only. In reflecting upon these opinions, I noted that a

parallel of sorts could be drawn between the results here and those of Thorkildsen's (1989) study looking at children's reasoning about the fairness of competition and cooperation given situational contexts. Briefly, Thorkildsen's study posed questions to first, third, and fifth grade students based upon examples of scenarios of testing situations (competitive) or learning situations (cooperative). The findings of this study noted that students viewed competition as unfair in learning situations and cooperation between students unfair in testing situations.

The methodology of this study was laid out in an opposite direction to that of Thorkildsen's in that two student selection scenarios were presented to subjects, who then constructed their own situational contexts in their evaluations of the fairness of each selection practice (reflected in the justification categories noted earlier). Although headed in a different direction, the results of this study balance those of Thorkildsen's when one reviews the conceptual bases for subjects' justification categories here.

For some subjects in this study, the process of student selection on the basis of grades and test scores seemed fair as grades were seen as a measure of competency or knowledge which would entitle such students to participate in special educational programs like the "Summer Science Program" used as an example here. The view that high grades and test

scores are "rewards" of a kind implies that these students may perceive schooling in general as a series of contests to be gotten through in order to receive whatever "goodies" or "extras" the school may offer. While students who operate in school in this fashion may well appear industrious, it could be argued that an aspect of quality and enjoyment is missing from their educational experience. In this view, it is the student's demonstrated ability that counts. His/her subjective experience of that ability or learning situation does not seem relevant from this perspective.

Other students, who advocated selection on the basis of student interest, seem not to define school as a contest. They define school as a place for learning rather than discovering who is the most able. Accordingly, it seems they argue that those with higher interest would learn most, and thus should be given priority.

The third category of justifications, like the second, appears to reflect a definition of school as a place for learning. It adds, however, an egalitarian or community ethos--everyone should have the opportunity to learn. As such, this position echoes the community ethos of some African-American leaders, notably Malcolm X (Haley and Malcolm X, 1973). This position does not seem to consider the issue of whether students' grades or interest in learning should be looked at as deciding factors in students' participation in school.

The fourth category, in which students took the view that high grades indicate high student interest in the subject (and the reverse) could be read as an inability to fully comprehend the dilemma presented in the interview. These students seemed convinced that the presence of a high grade in a subject area meant that the student had an interest level to match. It is not uncommon for students of the grade level sampled here to have difficulty in recognizing that students who apply high effort might nevertheless be unable to perform well relative to their peers (Nicholls, 1989). Thus, these students' lack of understanding indicates they cannot adequately confront the dilemma in any of the three ways discussed above.

The fact that there was no clear majority in favor of student selection on the basis of grades suggests that a number of African-American students may be operating in a school system which they view as unfair. Some level of credence is given to this when one remembers that the student sample looked at in this study was composed largely of urban African-American students from various parts of the city who are "making it" in their respective schools with regard to their grades and test scores. It is interesting that in this sort of group approximately one third of the students regarded student selection on the basis of student interest as a fairer practice than student selection based on grades.

Fordham (1991; 1988) has approached African-American students at the high school level in order to obtain views of schooling and educational practices from this view. As noted earlier, her agenda focused upon students' perceptions of school from a racial/cultural standpoint. While her approach certainly has added a depth of meaning to the question of how African-American students perceive school, this paper suggests that other avenues of inquiry can also be productive in that area. In focusing on a particular educational practice (student selection), subjects' views of the practice itself can be evaluated in terms that the subject provides. In the sample in this study, no mention was made by subjects of any aspect related to Fordham's "racelessness" position, nor did any subjects relate ethnic/racial biases as possible conditions related to student selection practices. Admittedly, the agenda here did not include a comparative racial/ethnic perspective. On the other hand, such a perspective was not excluded in that subject justifications could conceivably have contained such views.

Although the results of this study are by no means conclusive, they do serve to open the door onto an area of inquiry which has not been well explored to date. Returning to Woodson's (1933/1990) comment in the opening of this paper, if educational research hopes to lead to meaningful and productive educational reform, it seems clear that we must begin to focus on what and where the African-American

student is today, what his/her possibilities are, and how to begin with him/her as he/she is today. A sensible place to start is to examine how African-American students perceive various aspects of schooling with regard to whether or not they see them as fair. The method to employ is simply to begin a dialogue by asking them what they see and what they think. Listening to their experiences and perceptions will provide a direction toward developing an educational format that makes sense to them.

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Table 1
Mean subject responses by gender and as a group to interview Questions 1, 2, 3, and 16

Question	Male		Female		Group	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. Is this way (grades) fair?	3.1	1.8	2.7	1.9	3.0	1.8
2. Is this way (interest) fair?	2.1	1.7	2.7	1.9	2.3	1.8
3. Is one way fairer than the other?	2.5	1.3	2.7	1.2	2.6	1.3
16. Is one way fairer than the other?	3.5	1.4	2.5	1.4	3.0	1.5

Note: For Questions 1 and 2, 1 indicates strong agreement, 3 indicates neutral, and 5 indicates strong disagreement. For questions 3 and 16, 1 indicates selection on the basis of grades is much fairer, 3 indicates neutrality, and 5 indicates selection on the basis of interest is much fairer.

Table 2
Justifications for answers to Question 16: "Is one way (grades or interest) fairer?"

(N=50)		
Selection by grades fairer	Selection by interest fairer	Neither is fairer
11	14	5

Grades= interest	Other
7	13